

Two unpublished terracotta oil lamps from Marina el-Alamein in Egypt



Abstract: The two complete terracotta oil lamps published in this paper come from salvage excavations by an Egyptian team clearing House 21 in the ancient Graeco-Roman harbor of Marina el-Alamein on the northern coast of Egypt. Both are of Alexandrian manufacture, one of the two being an imitation of an Italic relief lamp. One is decorated with a representation of Sarapis enthroned, the other with a scene of roosters fighting. Both are from the 2nd–3rd century and reflect the Alexandrian cultural tradition in the life of this ancient town.

Keywords: oil lamps, Marina el-Alamein, Sarapis, roosters

The site known today as Marina el-Alamein from the modern tourist village surrounding the ruins is located about 100 km west of Alexandria, on the northern coast of Egypt. The name of this Graeco-Roman harbor has not been identified with certainty, the possibilities being either Antiphrae or Leucaspis, two names mentioned by the ancient geographers, Strabo (Strab. XVII.1.14, Map XV, illustrated in Ball 1942: 104, Pl. III) and Claudius Ptolemaeus, among the towns and settlements along the Mediterranean coast of Egypt. The ancient settlement flourished from the 2nd century BC to the 6th century AD and maybe after that time (Bąkowska-Czerner and Czerner 2015: 1617–1618).

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The site was discovered accidentally in 1986 and it has been excavated by an Egyptian–Polish mission since 1987. Ezzat El-Hamahmy from the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities carried out brief salvage excavations before the Poles in what was later designated as House 21. He found, among others, two complete terracotta oil lamps, now in the Marina el-Alamein

store in the Matrouh governorate. This paper is devoted to the publication of these two lamps.

OIL LAMP WITH SARAPIS RELIEF

A complete moldmade terracotta oil lamp (Inv. No. 96; L. 12; W. 11; H. 3; HH. 6 cm), type Bailey V (Bailey 1980: 396ff.), Loeschcke VIII (Loeschcke 1919: 237ff.),



Fig. 1. Oil lamp with Sarapis relief (Inv. No. 96): top and side view; base with producer's mark; bottom left, detail of the discus decoration (Courtesy Supreme Council of Antiquities, Ministry of Antiquities, Egypt)

Bussière DIX (Bussière and Wohl 2017: 287, Fig. 406), with a circular body. The nozzle is heart-shaped, with a round smoke-blackened wick-hole, decorated with two tendrils in relief emerging from the center onto the shoulder, and separated by a dot in relief [Fig. 1].

The handle is ring-shaped, decorated with two grooves and a notch across the top. The shoulder is sloping with small side-lugs made of scrolling volutes marked with round dots in relief. It is separated from the discus by two concentric grooves, and a band of closely spaced rays.

The discus is big, slightly concave, and decorated with a fairly indistinct relief of Sarapis seated on his throne, facing right, wrapped in a himation, and the modius on his head. He holds a scepter in his raised left hand and places his right hand on the head of Kerberos [see Fig. 1]. The filling-hole is located to avoid the decoration.

The base is flat, marked by two concentric grooves. Inside it is the Greek letter Υ . Greek letters were common on Roman lamps (Walters 1914: xxxiii). They were either incised or engraved directly into the unfired lamp (Bailey 1972: 23) [see Fig. 1].

The lamp was manufactured in Egypt, perhaps in Alexandria. It is worth noting that the moldmade ring handle with two or three grooves and a notch across the top was introduced in Egypt, from where it spread to other places (Młynarczyk 1998: 456). Furthermore, lamps with tendril decoration were developed in Egypt.

There are parallel examples from Marina with side-lugs (Zych 2004: 83–84, Fig. 5:E253). There are also other examples from Alexandria with side-lugs (Empereur and Nenna 2001: 453, Fig. 101) and an example from Alexandria with the relief of Sarapis

(Tran Tam Tinh and Jentel 1993: 54–55, Fig. 31). Other examples with a Sarapis relief from the Roman period are known from other locations (Perlzweig 1961: 121, Pl. 18, No. 805).

Bailey dated this type of Egyptian lamps with stepped handles to the 2nd century AD and later (Bailey 1988: 218). Furthermore, all the parallel examples discussed above were dated to the 2nd–3rd century AD. Therefore, it is reasonable to date this lamp to the 2nd–3rd century AD.

OIL LAMP WITH TWO ROOSTERS RELIEF

Moldmade terracotta oil lamp (Inv. No. 101; L. 10.5; W. 9; H. 3.5; HH. 5.5 cm) type Bailey Q(v), Loeschcke VIII, Bussière form DX1 (Bussière and Wohl 2017: 294, Fig. 419), Broneer XXV (Broneer 1930: 83–87), perfectly preserved, with circular body and heart-shaped nozzle [Fig. 2].

The handle is ring-shaped, decorated with three grooves on the upper part. The shoulder is decorated with a row of impressed ovules, and separated from the discus by two concentric grooves.

The slightly concave discus bears relief decoration in the form of two fighting roosters: the one to the left is attacking on bent legs, the one on the right is in a defense stance, jumping to avoid the attack.

The filling hole is circular, located between the roosters. There is an air vent positioned between the filling hole and the circular wick hole.

The base is flat, marked with the Greek Φ in molded relief [see Fig. 2].

The lamp is a copy of an Italian moldmade oil lamp; it was produced in Alexandria which continued to make Classical motifs for a long time (Młynarczyk 1998: 459).

A parallel example from the Museum of Ancient Culture in Sydney is dated to the late 2nd to early 3rd century AD (De Rosa 2014: 38, Fig. 9. mu.3802). This date is reasonable for this lamp, especially with the small air hole on the discus, which became a feature for lamps from the late 2nd century onward (Fitch and Goldman 1994: 149).

CONCLUSION

The two lamps from old excavations in a flourishing ancient harbor on the northern coast of Egypt west of Alexandria were manufactured undoubtedly in one of the Alexandrian workshops. They are an indication of Alexandrian influence, as clearly attested not only by the parallels, but also by the shape and decoration of the two lamps.



Fig. 2. Oil lamp with two roosters in relief (Inv. No. 101): top view and base with mark; bottom, detail of the discus (Courtesy Supreme Council of Antiquities, Ministry of Antiquities, Egypt)

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Abbreviations

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